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Lindgren, C., (2021), Changing notions of “good parents” and “the child’s best interest”.: Adoption in Sweden 1918-2018, *Annales de démographie historique*, 142(2), 51-80.
<https://doi.org/10.3917/adh.142.0051>

Original publication available at:

<https://doi.org/10.3917/adh.142.0051>

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Belin | « Annales de démographie historique » 2021/2 n° 142 | pages 51 à 80

ISSN 0066-2062

ISBN 9782410022636

DOI 10.3917/adh.142.0051

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse : <https://www.cairn.info/revue-annales-de-demographiehistorique-2021-2-page-51.htm>

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Changing notions of 'good parents' and 'the child's best interest'

Adoption in Sweden 1918-2018

By Cecilia LINDGREN

In 1918 the first Adoption Act was implemented in Sweden, and the latest major review and revision of adoption laws and regulations was finalised in 2018. Over the course of these one hundred years, much has changed, and the laws have been revised and renewed many times. Over this entire period, it has, however, been clearly stated that an adoption should not take place unless it is in the best interest of the child.¹ Central to this has been deciding, in each case, whether the prospective parents are eligible and suitable to adopt – do they meet the standards of 'good parents'? What the child's best interest entails and who is recognised as a good parent has not, however, been a given. In fact, it has been constantly debated, defined and redefined in adoption policy and practice (Lindgren, 2006, 2010). That is the starting point and focus of this article.

Although the regulation and organisation of assessment procedures has changed, it has always been up to municipal social services units, and social workers appointed by them, to assess prospective parents and recommend a decision in the adoption matter. Such assessments, and the written statements that laid the groundwork for legal decisions, offer a unique opportunity to understand how the formation of new families has been formally sanctioned and how 'good parenthood' and 'the child's best interest' have been defined in practice. It is through the actual presentation and arguments in such statements that the future of adoptive children has been determined. Given this, the aim of this study is to examine the history of adoption in Sweden through the analysis of the explicit assessment and formation of new families. Against the backdrop of general adoption policy and practice, from the 1910s through to the 2010s, individual cases are used to explore how adoption has been legitimised with reference to the best interest of the child. The analysis is based on social workers' written statements concerning *non-relative* adoptions from four periods: the 1920s, 1950s, 1970s and 2010s.

I understand adoption as a process where private and public parties and their interests intersect, and meanings of family, parenthood and the child's best interest are negotiated. It takes place in a societal context influenced by political decisions, scientific perspectives and cultural notions of children and family. Consequently, processes of change are not simple or straightforward, but complex. In her study of international adoption in the U.S., Winslow identifies a set of perspectives, or paradigms, that have governed its development and change: the *consumer* perspective, promoting efficient and privately organised placements to meet the needs of childless couples wanting to start a family; the *child welfare* perspective, calling for professional assessment and placement practices in order to make the child's best interest the paramount consideration; the *humanitarian* perspective, emphasising the need to 'rescue' and 'save' children and offer them a family; and the *development perspective*, prioritising support for child welfare solutions in 'developing countries', over international adoption (Winslow, 2017, 11-5). I find these perspectives, and their intersection, useful in also

understanding the development of both domestic and intercountry adoption in Sweden, and the changing notions of 'good parents' and 'the child's best interest'.

The outline of the article is as follows: After a short review of research on the assessment of adoptive parents in the 20th century and up to today, I account for my data and methodological considerations. I then examine major trends and transitions in Swedish adoption from 1918 to 2018. This serves as a context for the main section which is an analysis of assessment statements, led by questions about how good parenthood and the child's best interest were understood and adoption legitimised. The texts are analysed in detail, with the purpose of examining how their content and rhetorical structure supported the conclusion that the adopters were suited for parenthood and that an adoption would benefit the child. Finally, I discuss the results in relation to the competing, but often overlapping, perspectives informing adoption law, policy and practice.

Past and present adoption assessment

Research has demonstrated that the policy and practice of adoption is a lens through which historically and culturally bound ideas and truths can be studied (e.g. Berebitsky, 2000; Carp, 2002; Herman, 2008; Howell, 2006; Keating, 2009; Melosh, 2002; Rosbjørn Eriksen, 2020; Rossini, 2014; Winslow, 2017; Wirzén & Lindgren, 2021). The meaning of 'good parenthood' and 'the child's best interest' is not fixed. These are normative yet inconstant concepts that are defined in relation to knowledge, norms and traditions in different times and contexts, and whose ascribed meanings are reproduced in the adoption process (Lindgren, 2006, 2015). Historians who have studied assessment policy and practice in Western contexts point to significant changes over time, and the Second World War has been described as marking a shift in adoption history. In the early 20th century, the criteria for passing as a suitable parent were quite simple and straightforward: adoptive parents were supposed to have the financial means to take care of a child, and to be healthy, kind and diligent (Gill, 1997, 113-24; Keating, 2009, 133-6, 211). As psychology gained influence and social work was professionalised, however, the way of understanding, describing and assessing suitability changed.

When genetic theories were downplayed, in favour of theories pointing to the influence of environmental factors on a child's development, parenting capacity became the focus of attention. Under the influence of psychodynamic theory, prospective parents were scrutinised with a focus on their personality, relationships, emotional health, motives for adopting, etc. Mental processes more than life circumstances now formed the basis for suitability assessment. In line with what is distinctive of a 'therapeutic culture', adoption applicants had to show a willingness to share their inner thoughts and feelings and to participate in them being scrutinised (Berebitsky, 2000, 147-54; Gill, 2002, 160-74; Herman, 2004, 194-211; 2008, 201-4). The aim was not just to find suitable parents, but to form the 'best family' for every child. That would be accomplished by matching of, for example, physical appearance and character traits, a manifestation of what Ellen Herman has called 'kinship by design' (Gill, 2002, 161-5, Herman, 2008, 121-154; Melosh, 2002, 51-104). This ideal was also made explicit in the first Swedish handbook for adoption assessment from 1955, in which social workers were advised not to place short and dark-haired children with tall and fair-skinned parents and vice versa. The argument for this was that the child may grow up feeling like the odd one out in the family and being bothered by people's comments about the lack of resemblance (Lindgren, 2006, 127-9; see also Gill, 2002, 163).

As intercountry adoption began to be widely applied in the 1960s and 1970s, adoption policy and practices again underwent decisive changes (Lindgren, 2010; Rosbjørn Eriksen, 2020; Winslow, 2017). In this process, conceptions of family and belonging were challenged, and adoption as a means to form ideal families through matching was criticised. The ideal of physical resemblance, for example, could no longer be maintained and, instead, the importance of accepting and welcoming difference was emphasised (Berebitsky, 2000, 167-9; Carp, 2002, 14-7; Melosh, 2002, 160-6, 239-243). In Sweden, from the mid-1970s, this became an absolute requirement for passing as suitable for adoptive parenthood (Lindgren, 2010, 37-8). As Herman (2008, 247) has pointed out in her study of the U.S., authenticity was no longer gained by seeking similarity but by embracing difference.

Researchers who have analysed adoption in the early 21st century (Andersson, 2010, 74-81; Howell, 2006, 155; Modell, 2002, 133-65) point to how the criteria for suitability reflect traditional and stereotypical family norms, according to which the ideal parents are married couples that are emotionally and economically secure and live a stable and ordinary life. This corresponds well with how approved adoption candidates are described in Swedish assessment reports when it comes to housing, finances, personalities, relationships etc., namely as 'stable' and 'secure'. Further, parent suitability includes being aware of adopted children's specific needs, in terms of attachment and knowledge about background and origins (Lind & Lindgren, 2017, 57-62, see also Andersson, 2010, 72-4). The ideal Swedish adoptive family, fulfilling the requirements, lives a child-centred life with lots of time for playing, reading and being together (Lindgren, 2015, 481-3; Lindgren, 2016, 20-6). In their research on assessment in the Netherlands, Noordegraaf and her colleagues demonstrate how pedagogical capabilities, psychological traits and expectations for the future are examined in interviews, and also the ability to reflect on relationships and difficult life experiences (Noordegraaf, 2008, 317-25; 2009, 93-6; 2010, 304-6). The willingness and ability to talk about past difficulties is also emphasised in Swedish adoption guidelines, and by social workers assessing prospective parents (Andersson, 2010, 78-9; Wirzén & Lindgren, 2021, 579, 583-7).

Data and methodological approach

The first part of this article, which gives an overview of adoption policy and practice in Sweden 1918-2018, is based on a study of adoption legislation and parliamentary documents, and on results from my previous analyses of national and local statistics and adoption records from Stockholm District Court (Lindgren, 2006, 2010). The second and main part, which includes a detailed analysis of the explicit legitimisation of adoption, is based on assessment records concerning individual cases from four periods.

For my previous studies, I have collected and analysed data from Stockholm District Court from the periods of 1922-1924, 1956-1958 and 1973-1975 (court records, 375 cases, domestic and intercountry adoptions), and from two national non-profit intercountry adoption agencies 2011 (home-study reports, 106 cases).² As said above, it was established by law that an adoption should not be carried out unless it would benefit the child. During the first three periods I have studied, it was up to the court to decide if that requirement was met, and if the adoption would be finalised. As a basis for its ruling, the court would obtain a statement from the local children's welfare board. Such a statement, written by a social worker appointed by the board, included a review of the case and a recommendation for a decision on the adoption

matter. Any conclusion that the applicants were suited to adopt and that an adoption was in the best interest of the child was based on the social worker's statement. It is thus a key document when examining how the formation of families through adoption has been legitimised, and how the meaning of 'good parents' and 'the child's best interest' has changed.

In the last of the four periods studied, the 2010s, most adoptions were finalised in the child's country of birth and not by a Swedish court. According to the Hague Adoption Convention, the role of Swedish authorities was to assess prospective adopters and make sure they were eligible and suited to adopt. An analysis of how parent suitability was determined and described may therefore instead be based on the social services' home-study report, and its 'concluding assessment and recommendation'. It was the information and arguments presented here that laid the groundwork for the Social welfare committee's legal decision to grant the applicants consent to adopt. It is important to note that such statements were completed prior to any placement of a child and that they therefore focused on the applicants' *potential* to parent a yet *unknown* child. They hence illustrate the understanding of parent suitability, which, in turn, says something about what is considered to be in the best interest of a child.

Assessment statements were coded using the data analysis software program NVivo, regarding what was reported about prospective parents, biological parents, and the child. Broader as well as more specific coding and thematic analyses, focusing on various assessment topics, have been conducted and presented elsewhere (e.g. Lindgren, 2006; Lind & Lindgren, 2017). For this study, approximately fifty assessment statements from the four periods were subjected to a close reading and analysis, with the aim of identifying one case from each period that matches the previous analyses well and hence can be seen as representative of statements from that period. The statements chosen were analysed in detail with the purpose of examining what facts, descriptions, opinions and arguments were presented as the basis for recommending an adoption. I approach these documents, not as descriptive texts presenting facts and events in a neutral way, but as institutional texts with a certain objective, namely, to underpin and justify the social worker's recommendation (Hall et al., 2006, 15-6; Noordegraaf et al., 2009, 95). The norms of parenthood and the child's best interest that guided everyday practices can be recognised through an analysis of how this was done.

When studying the history of adoption with a focus on changing and prevailing norms, the bias of this data is not a problem but an asset. What values and opinions does the author communicate, and what does that say about family and parenthood ideals? Those are the questions in focus. As studies of language practices in social work have highlighted, social work accounts are often concerned with moral accounts and 'categorisation work' (Hall et al., 2006, 15-34; Lindgren, 2016, 18-26; Noordegraaf et al., 2009, 89-96). Claiming that someone is a 'good' or an 'unfit' parent requires "...a formulation that demonstrates her as possessing attributes or behaviours which warrants the category" (Hall et al., 2006, 22). My analysis of adoption statements hence focuses on the rhetorical means by which adoptive applicants were categorised as suitable parents, and how adoptions were thereby legitimised.

Adoption law, policy and practice – Trends and transitions

In his study of child adoption in Western Europe 1900-2015, Mignot (2019, 338-9) identified four common trends in adoption law during this period: 1) Adoption was facilitated more, 2) More adoptions were full, rather than simple, 3) Adoption became a legal matter rather than

a private contract, and 4) It became more difficult to revoke an adoption. Since 1918, when the first Adoption Act was implemented in Sweden, the rules and regulations have been revised and renewed very much in line with these trends. In this first section of the article, I give an overview of the development over the past 100 years, with a focus on legislative work and general adoption trends. It is organised in relation to two key transitions – from weak to strong adoption, and from domestic to intercountry adoption.

From weak to strong adoption

The passing of the first Swedish Adoption Act signified that a new way of establishing a family had been introduced and validated nationally. It was motivated, for example, by reference to foster children who grew up as if they were their foster parents' biological children. In such cases, the relationship could be socially and emotionally stable but legally insecure, and it was argued that foster parents should be given the opportunity to solidify the child-parent relationship through adoption. The possibility of establishing a firmer relationship was also expected to encourage more people to adopt and help reduce the number of children growing up in poor conditions, especially children born out of wedlock.³ These children were, at the time, on the political agenda in both Europe and the U.S. In Sweden, the proportion of children born out of wedlock (15%) was greater than in other European countries. Their mortality rate (12%) was higher compared to children born in wedlock (7%), they were more often placed in orphanages or foster homes and they were more often dependent on poor relief. Given this, they were perceived as a problem and a group that needed to be 'saved', for their own sake but also for the sake of society and its future. The Adoption Act of 1918 was part of a larger reform package aimed at improving the living conditions of these children (Bergman, 2003, 88-93; Lindgren, 2006, 93-4).

According to the 1918 Adoption Act, a man or woman who had reached the age of 25 was eligible to adopt, and a married person had to adopt together with her or his spouse. An unmarried person was allowed to adopt as a single parent, and this applied to both men and women. People with biological children were only allowed to adopt in particular circumstances that were accepted by the court, for example if the child was a close relative being looked after by the applicants. Minors could not be adopted without the consent of the parents or legal guardian, and a child who had turned 12 could not be adopted without her or his own consent. In terms of inheritance, a child's rights in relation to their biological family were not affected by an adoption. However, an adopted child would also inherit from her or his adoptive parents, but not their family and relatives. Adoptive parents, on the other hand, would not inherit from their adopted child. Furthermore, an adoption could be revoked if one of the parties abused the other or engaged in crime, or if it would benefit the child for some other reason.⁴ Consequently, the legal relationship between adoptive parents and adoptive children did not fully correspond with that between parents and their biological children. What was introduced by the 1918 Act was hence a form of so-called weak adoption.

A study of adoptions in Stockholm 1922-1924 showed that the implementation of the law corresponded well with the intentions behind it. About 45% of the children were adopted by their step-parent or by relatives (relative adoption), while the others were adopted by people they were not related to (non-relative adoption). The children adopted by non-relatives were not primarily children of low age, but the great majority had come to their prospective adoptive parents before the age of two. The adoption thus served to sanction an already

existing relationship, which was a clearly stated purpose of the law. The majority of children were born out of wedlock, and as many as a quarter of them were reported to have an unknown or deceased mother. Most children were adopted by married couples, but single adopters were not uncommon (15%). Very few of the adopters had biological children, which also was in accordance with the law. An analysis of the adopters' socio-economic status, based on their occupation, showed that people from all strata could be approved as adoptive parents. Actually, the largest group of adopters belonged to what in a Swedish context would be called social group 3, 'the working class' (Lindgren, 2006, 97-101).⁵

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the number of adoptions tripled, from just under 1,000 to just over 3,000 per year (figures to be related to a population of approximately 6,5 million). Still, political debates raised the need for measures to encourage more people to adopt. Based on an estimated high number of children in need, two fundamentally important changes to the law were consequently made in 1944. First, persons who had biological children were allowed to adopt without special reasons. Second, the options for revoking an adoption were expanded. From now on, adoptive parents could apply for a revocation within a five-year period if the child was found to suffer from any physical or mental disorder or serious illness that occurred before the adoption, but that the adopters were unaware of. This was presented as a way to protect prospective adopters and their biological children, and to lessen the possible hazards of adopting a small child.⁶ Consequently, weak adoption became even weaker as the adopters' interests were emphasised at the cost of the adopted child's. Fifteen years later, however, the arguments had changed, and the rules on adoption were reformed again. The weak legal relationship between adoptive parents and their child was now seen as incompatible with the idea of adoption, and it was pointed out that people were hesitant to adopt because of it.⁷

The 1940s peak in adoption numbers was followed by a period of decline, and a study on adoptions in Stockholm 1956-1958 indicated some interesting changes compared to the early years. Approximately 90% of the children adopted by non-relatives were born out of wedlock, but very few of them were motherless. With few exceptions, the child came to her or his new family very early and was adopted within two years. Adopters were nuclear families with a bread-winning father and a housewife mother. Typically, they were in their 30s and had no biological children together. In the analysed sample there were no single adopters. Although working-class families were still accepted as adoptive parents, the majority of the families now belonged to what according to the Swedish model for socio-economic stratification would be called social groups 1, 'the better situated', and 2 'the middle class' (Lindgren, 2006, 29, 139-143).⁸ This testifies that adoption was no longer primarily a means of finding good-enough homes for poor children, but also a way of helping better-off childless couples to start a family. This change also brought new practices, such as adoption *in blanco*, meaning that the adoption was arranged by the child welfare authorities without biological parents and adoptive parents knowing each other's identity. Given that, weak adoption was now perceived as threatening the position of adoptive parents rather than protecting their rights.

In 1959, the so-called strong adoption was introduced, and adoption came to involve a complete transfer of the child from one family to another.⁹ An important argument was that many adoptions were arranged *in blanco*. Since such an adoption meant that the child's connection to the biological family was cut off, neither should there be any legal ties between them. A complete break with the biological family was even presented as a condition for a successful adoption. It would make the adoptive parents feel safer, and it would be good for

the relationship between them and the child if both parties knew that they fully belonged together. Moreover, it was argued, the child would not have to be worried about biological relatives trying to make contact.¹⁰ Consequently, adopted children were given the same rights as biological children in terms of inheritance. It was still possible, however, for both parties to apply for the adoption to be revoked, although an application from adoptive parents was to be denied if the court found that the adoption should stand, despite the reasons referenced.¹¹

The introduction of strong adoption in 1959 marks a significant shift regarding the implications of adoption in Sweden. Adoptive parents were no longer, in a legal sense, a supplementary family, but an alternative family replacing the birth family (see Mignot, 2019, 336). This also implied that social and legal bonds could fully replace blood ties as the foundation of family. The 'child's best interest' was no longer to be part of both families, but instead to belong to just one family – the adoptive family.

From domestic to intercountry adoption

From the 1950s onwards, the number of children available for adoption dropped, while the applicant waiting lists grew longer. By the mid-1960s prospective adoptive parents were waiting 4-5 years to adopt, and ten years later almost no Swedish children were adopted (Lindgren, 2006, 29-31). This was not unique to Sweden. The same development was seen internationally, although the decline started earlier in Sweden than in, for example, the U.S. The fact that fewer children were placed for adoption has been given two interrelated explanations. On the one hand, women's opportunities to avoid unplanned pregnancies and childbirth increased, through contraception and abortion. On the other hand, their opportunities to actually give birth and take care of a child, even if they were single, also improved (Carp, 2002, 16; Gill, 1997, 309; Melosh, 2002, 160-1, 239). The single mother had become more socially accepted and, in Sweden, better access to childcare made it possible for her to support herself and her child (Lindgren, 2006, 30-1). Such changes may also have helped to make it less acceptable to place a child for adoption.

In this situation, individuals as well as non-profit associations started to arrange adoptions of children from other countries. This was, however, both legally and bureaucratically complicated, and, in response to political and public demands, measures were taken to facilitate intercountry adoption. For example, in 1966, an agreement was signed between the Swedish Social Welfare Board and the Child Placement Service in Seoul, South Korea. Further, the Swedish Social Welfare Board expanded its work to provide information and support for individuals seeking to adopt abroad.¹² A new law was passed in 1971, according to which an adoption in Sweden would not need to be valid in the child's country of birth. This made it possible to adopt from countries that had no legal framework for adoption.¹³ Once alternatives to adopting Swedish children were sanctioned and facilitated, the number of adoptions immediately increased, and, in the subsequent years, intercountry adoptions became very common in Sweden, compared to other countries in Western Europe (Lindgren, 2006, 29; Mignot, 2019, 352).

The general adoption regulations were also revised, and the possibility to revoke an adoption was abolished in 1970.¹⁴ The argument was that an adoption should be equivalent to the biological relationship between parents and children, and that the current rules spoke against that.¹⁵ A revocation due to a child's disability or illness was perceived as incompatible with a modern approach.¹⁶ The revision was also justified with reference to the increasingly common

adoptions of children from abroad. It was considered unacceptable that a child adopted from another country, in case of a revocation, would have no family or relatives in Sweden. Furthermore, given that all adoptions should be motivated by the child's best interest, the revocation right, now considered to be based on a parent's perspective, had to be abolished.¹⁷

My previous study on non-relative adoptions in Stockholm 1973-1975 confirms the transition from domestic to intercountry adoptions in Sweden. Only 2% of the children adopted were born in Sweden. The vast majority came from countries outside Europe, predominantly South Korea, one of the first countries with which Sweden signed an adoption agreement. Most children were adopted before the age of 2, but about 10% of them were 6 years or older. In the court records, there was almost no information about the biological parents, and 66% of the children adopted were reported to have an unknown mother. The typical adoptive parents at this time were a married couple in their 30s who were both working. More families than before had biological children, and there were examples of single persons adopting. The proportion of working-class families was significantly smaller than in the 1950s (9% compared to 22%), and they were clearly under-represented in relation to the population. More than 50% of the families now belonged to social group 1, 'the better situated', and they were over-represented in relation to the population.¹⁸ This means that the trend toward more well-off adoptive families had been further strengthened. This of course must be understood in relation to the many international adoptions, which involved considerable expense (Lindgren, 2006, 188-92).

Public and political debates continued throughout the 1970s, as the interest in adopting internationally grew and the support offered by state authorities was considered insufficient. Irregularities in adoption procedures abroad were also revealed and there was a call for a revision of adoption intermediary regulations. Longer waiting times had led to an increased number of privately arranged adoptions, which were considered to be riskier for all parties (Lindgren, 2010, 41-7). Therefore, in 1979, a new law was passed according to which non-profit adoption agencies, who applied for and were granted state authorisation, were to organise the intermediation of intercountry adoptions.¹⁹ The intention was to shorten the waiting lists by enabling several agencies to establish contacts abroad and to arrange for adoptions in a controlled way. It was still possible, however, to go down the route of establishing private contacts abroad and arranging for an adoption that way, as long as it was handled according to adoption laws and regulations (Lindgren, 2010, 47-9).

From 1969 to 1991, approximately 32,000 children were adopted to Sweden from non-Nordic countries – 62% came from Asia (mainly India and South Korea), 25% from Latin America (mainly Colombia), 10% from Europe (mainly Poland), and 3% from Africa (mainly Ethiopia). In the late 1980s, however, an increase in the number of adoption applicants coincided with a drop in the number of children available for adoption to Sweden, due to more restrictive policies in some countries. With longer waiting times came yet another increase in so-called private adoptions, and they were again brought to the fore as a pressing problem (Lindgren, 2010, 73-4). In 1992, a commission was tasked with preparing proposals to facilitate adoptions that met high ethical standards and were in the best interest of the child. It also aimed at analysing what needed to be done in Sweden, given that the Hague Adoption Convention was concluded in 1993 (Lindgren, 2010, 77). As a result, two laws were passed in 1997, one on international adoption mediation, and one through which the Hague Adoption Convention was incorporated into Swedish law. Most importantly, the option of making private arrangements for adoption was significantly reduced. Adopting privately was now only

possible if the prospective parents had a particular connection to a specific child, or to the country.²⁰

Six years later, in 2003, adoption laws were revised again, so that same-sex couples were allowed to go through an assessment process and be granted consent to adopt. Also, second-parent adoption of children in same-sex families was allowed. Allowing same-sex couples to adopt a non-relative child was a controversial issue, and the debate had been going on for some years.²¹ Given that domestic adoption was very uncommon, and few other countries accepted same-sex parents, the reform did not affect adoption practice to any great extent. It was not until 2015 that the first Swedish same-sex couple adopted abroad.

Since the early 2000s there has been a significant decrease in the number of intercountry adoptions in most Western countries (Mignot, 2019, 352-4; Selman, 2012), and Sweden has seen a drop from about 1000 to about 150-200 adoptions per year through authorised agencies. Also, a greater proportion of the children adopted to Sweden, and to Western Europe generally, are older and/or have some kind of disability or special needs and cannot be placed with a family in their birth countries (Lindgren, 2010, 161; Mignot, 2019, 354).

In 2018, one hundred years after the implementation of the first Adoption Act, the rules and regulations were revised. Various laws, with implications for adoption procedures and relationships, were modernised. For example, couples living together without being married were declared eligible to adopt, and the lower age limit for adopters was changed from 25 to 18, which is the age of majority in Sweden. It was also made clear that there should be no upper age limit defined by law, but that age should be one of many aspects to consider in the adoption home study. The overall aim of this reform package, however, was to strengthen the rights of the child and to secure efficient and legally secure adoption procedures. Therefore, the most important change was that children were ascribed a right to be informed by their parents about being adopted, and also a right to express their views concerning the adoption.²²

Against the backdrop of this development, I now turn to the examination of how individual cases were assessed and legitimised.

Legitimising the formation of adoptive families

The overarching question for the following analysis of social workers' statements is how adoption has been legitimised through the categorisation of applicants as good parents, and how that relates to the meaning of the child's best interest. I want to make clear that I, as a researcher, do not take a stance on whether the adoptions were in fact in the best interest of the child, and whether the adopters were suited for parenthood. What I am studying, is how these issues have been understood in the historical context, and what this can tell us about changing norms of family and parenthood in the history of adoption.

Throughout the text, I use the term social worker for those who conducted the assessment and wrote the statement. In the 1920s this could often be a person who worked for the children's welfare board but who had no formal training, whereas the assessments of the 2010s were performed by highly professional staff with an academic degree. When referring to the individual cases, I take measures to protect the anonymity of the people involved. The full reference to the empirical material is therefore not stated, but instead a reference to the internal coding of the case sample is provided. All names have been changed, and other kinds

of information may have been altered or omitted in a way that does not influence the meaning of the text but protects anonymity.²³

Offering a home – the 1920s

In the early years of adoption, single parents and parents living in poor conditions were given the court's sanction to adopt. This indicates that the definition of a proper family was quite generous. Many adoptions concerned children who had been placed as foster children in the family and had stayed there for quite some time. In such cases, the actual adoption was a way of securing family bonds that already existed, which was perfectly in line with the legislators' intentions (Lindgren, 2006, 97-101).

Foster parents who wanted to adopt had to be willing and able to take full responsibility for supporting the child without financial compensation, and also to make the parent-child relationship permanent. Furthermore, an adoption had to be in the best interest of the child. Consequently, in the assessment of an adoption, which laid the groundwork for the court's decision, the disruption of biological parent-child relationships and the legal formation of a new family had to be legitimised. The following case illustrates how this was done in practice.

When construction worker Mr. Bergkvist and his wife adopted their three-year-old foster daughter, they had been taking care of her since she was 6 months old.²⁴ In their case, as in most other cases, the biological parents had agreed to the adoption by signing a written consent. The social worker appointed to handle the case wrote in her statement as follows:

When she was born, the child weighed 1.510 kilograms, but despite that she has developed well, and she is healthy. Mrs. Bergkvist has always cared for her with the utmost love and conscientiousness. Mr. and Mrs. Bergkvist's home has always, upon my visits there, been perfectly proper and well maintained. Mrs. Bergkvist appears to be an exceptionally diligent and competent housewife. As Mr. and Mrs. Bergkvist are very fond of the girl, and they have no children of their own, they would like to adopt her.

About the biological parents, she reported:

[The mother] ...is no longer able to contribute to the care of her child, because she [recent date] gave birth to another child. [...] [The father] ...is also, allegedly, the father of [the mother]'s second child, but he is now engaged to someone else.

She concluded:

Given that [the girl] will never have a home with her parents, it will surely be best for her if she could stay with her foster parents.

Here the statement, as an institutional text presented to the court, legitimises the adoption by portraying the foster parents as 'good' parents and the biological parents as, not necessarily bad, but 'inadequate' parents. The foster mother is described as *loving* and *conscientious* in relation to the child, and besides taking care of her she runs an impeccable *household*. The seemingly objective information about the girl's low birth weight and sound recovery and development also testifies to her capability and serves to support the social worker's judgment. In relation to nursing and caring, the statement focuses on the foster mother. It is interesting to note, however, how the foster father is also included in the categorisation of good parents. The social worker describes them, together, as *very fond of* the girl. Adopting her is something they both want, and this formulation indicates that they are both emotionally attached to her.

The biological mother and father, on the other hand, are not described at all in terms of character, but the short presentation of facts concerning their living conditions effectively excludes them from the category of good enough parents. The mother is said to be *unable to care* for her daughter because she is single and just had another baby. Even though the information about the father is very brief, it serves to strengthen the arguments for an adoption. The possibility of him and the mother getting back together and taking care of their children is ruled out by the fact that he is *engaged to somebody else*. By stating these facts, the social worker effectively communicates that the parents, not only in the short term but also in the foreseeable future, will be unable to take care of their child. The decisive argument here is that they cannot offer *a home*, and therefore it is in the best interest of the child to be adopted by parents who can.

In this case, the biological parents' situation is described rather neutrally, but in some cases, they were subject to explicit moral judgment. Regarding the adoption of a four-year-old boy, the social worker wrote: "The child's own parents are neither able nor willing to care for their child. The mother [name] has never taken care of the child herself. She has further, in every way possible, tried to stay away and keep her address a secret..."²⁵ In yet another case, the statement said that the father of a two-year-old girl "...has never cared about the child in any way, but instead always tried to escape his child support obligations towards her".²⁶ In these cases, it is not only the biological parents' capability that is in focus but also their willingness to take responsibility for their child, and, implicitly, their emotional commitment.

In legitimising the adoption, the biological parents and the adoptive parents are weighed against each other and, through the display of the difference between them, 'good parenthood' and the child's best interest are defined. The biological parents *cannot*, and sometimes *are not willing*, to take care of their child, not for the time being and not in the future. The prospective adoptive parents on the other hand are *able* and *willing* to care for the child and they are doing it for the right reason, namely because they are *emotionally attached* to the child. Through the rhetorical organisation of the statement to the court, granting the adoption appears to be the best solution.

Assessment in an era of professionalisation – the 1950s

New psychological perspectives influenced mid-century child welfare policy, and the importance of a well-functioning family and a close relationship between mother and child was emphasised. Social work was professionalised, and case work methods were introduced. As noted before, the number of adoptions had increased but the waiting lists now grew longer. In 1953, the children's welfare board in Stockholm therefore started a special agency called 'the adoption bureau', to organise the assessment and mediation of adoptions. Procedures were professionalised and psychological and psychiatric expertise was brought in. There was a hope that this would reduce the number of privately arranged child placements and problematic adoptions (Lindgren, 2005, 115-8, 138).

Two years later, in 1955, the first national guidelines for adoption assessment were issued. In short, they stated that the biological mother must decide for herself whether she wanted an adoption, and that she should not be pressured or judged. As for prospective parents, they should be childless, and it was recommended that they went through a medical examination to establish they would not have biological children in the future. Their motives for adopting and their psychological qualifications were most important, such as being able to offer love,

understanding and security. A close and emotional relationship to a family, and most importantly a mother, was described as crucial to a child's sound development. A nuclear family, with a stay-at-home mother, was considered best able to meet the needs of the child, and the family should match to ensure its members' sense of belonging together. The ideal adoptive family was thus a replica of the biological family, but one that could offer what the biological parents failed to provide (Lindgren, 2006, 120-37).

In this new context, how was the formation of new families legitimised, and how were good parents and the child's best interest defined in practice? The majority of adoptions finalised in Stockholm District Court in 1956-58 were mediated through the adoption bureau. The case to be analysed here was one of them.

When Mr. and Mrs. Levinson adopted their one-year-old son, they had been taking care of him since he was five months old.²⁷ The placement was arranged by the adoption bureau, so the Levinsons and the birth parents were probably unaware of each other's identity. In her statement to the court, the social worker reported that the birth mother had contacted the bureau, as she wanted her yet unborn baby to be adopted. She had a permanent position in the office of a firm, and the father worked at a sales company. He was divorced and had a nine-year-old son from his previous marriage. The social worker wrote:

When visiting the bureau, the mother told us that she had been married but was divorced, and that she was now expecting a baby with a man who was not her former husband. She has no children. She was living together with the baby's father, but she did not expect her relationship with him to last. She wanted to give the baby a chance of growing up under better circumstances than she herself could offer. [...] Also, the father of the child thought that it would be best for all parties to give the child up for adoption, as the relationship between him and the mother would probably turn out not to be long-lasting.

The statement also relates that, in her meeting with the bureau's doctor, the mother seemed sure of her decision and that both parents had signed a written consent.

After the baby boy was born, he was placed in a children's home for infants, and five months later he came to Mr. and Mrs. Levinson, who had been on the adoption bureau's waiting list for almost three years. The social worker wrote:

According to the doctors, their chances of having children of their own are virtually non-existent. Both spouses have been longing deeply for a child, and having a child has for them become more and more a necessity of life. They both grew up with many siblings and their own childlessness has caused strong feelings of emptiness. The spouses have been open and cooperative, and they have made a good impression. The relationship between them also seems to be good.

It is reported that Mr. Levinson works for a state agency and has a secure income. Mrs. Levinson does not work but takes care of the household and the little boy. They have recently moved to a modern and spacious apartment. And further:

The spouses welcomed the boy with sincere joy and gratitude, and during the bureau's visits to the home he has proven to be well developed, lively, happy and alert. The foster father thinks that they, with the boy, have been given an important task to fulfil, and they do seem to be closely attached to him. Their dearest wish is that the adoption will be settled, so that they can rest assured that they can keep him.

Finally, the social worker states that the adoption would be beneficial to the child and that she recommends approval.

This is a typical statement from the adoption bureau at this time, in terms of length, disposition, tone and content (cf. Lindgren, 2006, 144-5). An analysis of its rhetorical organisation and arguments can point to similarities, but also interesting changes in how good parenting is defined and adoptions legitimised.

In the narrative leading up to the investigator's recommendation, information is presented that forms an implicit argument for why an adoption would be in the best interest of the child. Just like in the 1920s example, the birth parents and the adoptive parents are weighed against each other. However, it is not so much about their actual capacity to care for a child, as about their motives, feelings and ways of reasoning. The birth parents are not poor but have good working positions and live together. The reason they want to give the child up for adoption is that *they do not think their relationship will last*. This indicates that maybe it would have been possible for them to take care of their baby, but they both think it would be *best for him* to be adopted. The mother is also reported as saying that she wants to *offer her child a better life* than she can give him.

By accounting for the mother's own way of reasoning, the social worker portrays her not as a bad or inadequate mother, but as a responsible and unselfish parent who realises that staying with her is not the best for her child. Accordingly, she is given the opportunity to rule herself out as a mother, not because she is a bad parent, but because she is a good one. Even though she is better off than the poor single mothers of the 1920s, blood ties weigh lightly in comparison with what the Levinsons can offer, namely the benefits of growing up in a nuclear family with a stay-at-home mother. In this context, the birth parents are not assigned any moral blame.

The adoptive parents, then, are categorised as good parents, not primarily in relation to their living circumstances or their personal characteristics but to their emotional readiness to become parents. According to the statement, they have *longed* for years, and they are *happy* and *grateful* for the opportunity to finally form a family. The father is also explicitly characterised as devoted to parenthood, by the reference to him describing what a responsibility the adoption involves. And further, the remark that they wish to have the adoption finalised as soon as possible demonstrates that they want nothing but to take that responsibility. Moreover, the depiction of the spouses as *open* and *cooperative* indicates that they have accepted the bureau's assessment procedures. This, and their *good relationship*, creates a positive image, but a key rhetorical means by which they are associated with 'good parenthood' is also the description of the child. It is the social worker's observations of him being *well developed*, *lively*, *happy* and *alert* that testify to their suitability.

Just like in the 1920s example, the statement displays the contrast between birth parents and adoptive parents. The birth mother, however, is not portrayed as incapable of looking after a child, but capable of deciding what is best for her son. Consequently, what the discrepancy between the birth parents and the adoptive parents produces rhetorically is not primarily a definition of good and inadequate parenthood, but a definition of what is in the child's best interest, namely, to grow up in a nuclear family with two loving and devoted parents. To accomplish this, no one needs to be declared incapable or irresponsible – both parties can be portrayed as fulfilling the moral order of parenthood.

Suited to parent a child born abroad – the 1970s

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, new perspectives on children and family life were gaining ground in Swedish welfare policy. There was an emphasis on children as social beings, and the importance of them fostering relationships outside the family. The small, sometimes isolated nuclear family with a stay-at-home mother was questioned as the best socialisation environment. At least, it alone was not able to offer what was needed for a child's sound development. It was through interaction with peers and other adults, for example in pre-school, that children would learn the values of democracy and solidarity. This was closely connected to the wider political issues of the time, on gender equality, women's employment and the expansion of day-care for small children (Lindgren, 2006, 161-3).

As described before, it was during this period that intercountry adoptions basically replaced domestic adoptions. In the political discussion about intercountry adoption policy and regulations, there was a focus on the problems a child may experience in terms of adjusting to life in Sweden and forming an identity. The success of an adoption was dependent on how the child would manage feelings of being different, and how well parents would convey to her or him the sense of security and self-esteem needed to handle such feelings (Lindgren, 2010, 26-30). Among the intercountry adoption pioneers who operated in this era of internationalisation and solidarity movements, however, there was a strong belief that families could be formed across borders and that love could overcome all barriers (Lindgren, 2010, 49-54).

The first intercountry adoption assessment handbook, issued in 1974, made no attempt to characterise the good parent. Instead, it highlighted attributes, views and motives that were considered less appropriate for an adoptive parent. Above all, three points clearly indicated what was unacceptable. Parents of a child from another country must not be *intolerant*, but understanding, when it comes to people and behaviours viewed as 'different'. They must not be *afraid of differences*, between themselves and the child or between their child and other children. This also included being afraid of other people's comments about physical appearance, wishing for physical resemblance and wanting to keep the adoption a secret. And, lastly, parents must not have a *poor social life* that limits the child's contact with other children and families. This characterisation of unfit parents suggests what was considered most important to a child born abroad, namely, to be fully accepted and able to form relationships within a wider social network (Lindgren, 2006, 174-88).

It is worth pointing out that what was viewed in the 1950s as the prerequisite for a successful adoption – the pursuit of sameness – was now the ultimate characteristic of unsuitable parents. How then were adoptive parents portrayed and categorised as suitable, in practice?

In 1974, Mr. and Mrs. Nyman, a childless couple, were assessed and granted consent by the children's welfare board to take in a child born abroad, with a view to adoption.²⁸ They adopted a three-year-old boy in Sri Lanka, and after one year the Swedish adoption procedure started. According to the documents, the child's birth father was unknown. His birth mother, whose name and occupation were stated, had signed a written consent that was attached to the file. There was no information about how the adoption had been arranged, and the records do not say whether the Nymans had travelled to Sri Lanka to pick up their son or if he had come to Sweden with an escort, which was quite common at the time.

Unlike the statements from the two earlier periods, this one very much focuses on the child. The social worker responsible for the foster care inspections since the boy, now named Jacob, had come to the Nyman family, had made three home visits. She wrote:

Ever since he came to the foster home, Jacob has been very healthy. A suspected hearing impairment turned out to be an incorrect diagnosis. His language development appears to be adequate. Jacob is registered with the children's health centre in [name of district], which has performed standard check-ups and always found him to be very healthy and well looked after. He has developed normally and is well adjusted to his new environment. He is very attached to his parents and they to him. The family has their own house in [name of area], an area with a lot of young families. Jacob has many friends his own age.

She further reports where Mr. Nyman, who is an engineer, works and what he makes per month, what Mrs. Nyman's occupation is and the fact that she is not working at the time. She continues:

She quit her job at the time when Jacob came to them, and she plans to stay home at least for the next few years. The husband, too, has arranged so that he will have plenty of time for Jacob. Since last spring they have been childminders to a little girl. It works very well with Jacob and her. The family hopes to adopt a second child, eventually. Mrs. Nyman's parents live nearby, and they often visit the family. They too, are very happy and proud of Jacob. The family wishes for Jacob to soon be fully incorporated into it, through adoption.

In the concluding remarks, it is pointed out that "... Jacob has been much longed for. His parents appear to offer him affection, warmth and stimulation". The social worker argues that the adoption would benefit him and recommends that it be finalised.

Here, it is neither the parents' personal characteristics nor their actions that testify to their suitability for parenthood, but instead the child's situation and development. It is through the description of the child that the parents are ascribed competence and the adoption is legitimised: Jacob is *healthy, well looked after* and *well adjusted*. He *is developing well* and there is an *emotional bond* between him and his parents. This indicates not only that Jacob is doing well but, more importantly, that he has parents whose care and attention promotes his wellbeing.

The latter part of the statement describes the family's life situation, and just like the information about Jacob, it contributes to the categorisation of the Nymans as good parents. They have their *own house* and both parents will have *plenty of time* for Jacob, and this information forms an image of family life and togetherness. Added to this is the note that there are many young families in the neighbourhood and that Jacob has *many friends*. This assures the reader that, even though he just recently arrived in Sweden, he has formed social relationships with others. Furthermore, the fact that Mrs. Nyman's parents are reported to be *very happy and proud*, demonstrates that the adoption is supported by close relatives who welcome Jacob into the wider family network.

What the statement as an institutional text accomplishes, by means of content and wording, is thus to demonstrate that Mr. and Mrs. Nyman match the category of good parents and that being adopted by them would be in Jacob's best interest. Not only do they love and care for him, prioritise being with him and further his development, they also offer him loving relatives and many friends close by. They hence fulfil the key requirements stressed in the national guidelines. The text communicates effectively that there is no need to worry about Jacob, he has got the best possible conditions for developing a sense of belonging, in the family and in society.

Assessing parenting potential – the 2010s

At the time of my last case, 2011, the Swedish Social Services Act stipulated that an adoption assessment should cover the applicants' age, state of health, personal qualities and social network, as well as their knowledge and insight concerning adopted children and their needs, and the implications of an adoption. In the assessment handbook for social services, the National Board of Health and Welfare (NBHW) identified key areas to be discussed and defined resources and risk factors in relation to suitability for parenthood (Lind & Lindgren, 2017, 54). The report in which the examination of applicants was presented should, according to the guidelines, conclude with the social worker's analysis and opinion. As argued elsewhere, it is in this concluding statement that "the investigator puts forward his/her main arguments, supporting his/her recommendation that the applicants are (or are not) suitable to adopt. This is where the essence of the applicants' parenting potential is presented..." (Lind & Lindgren, 2017, 55). In the following, I use such a final statement to analyse how prospective adopters were portrayed as suited for parenthood.

In 2011, Maria and Aron Jonson, a married couple without children, applied to the social services in the municipality where they lived for a consent to adopt a child born in another country.²⁹ They went through the assessment process, and their application was approved. They then turned to one of the non-profit adoption agencies for mediation services, but the documents do not say whether they ever adopted a child. However, it was through the assessment, and the social welfare board's decision based on it, that the Jonsons were defined as suited for adoptive parenthood.

After having described various aspects of the applicants' background, relationship, life circumstances, motives for adopting etc., the social worker, who refers to herself as 'the investigator', ends her report with a summary and a concluding assessment. She reports that both spouses grew up in stable and secure homes, that they have a nice home, a stable financial situation, many friends, and jobs that they enjoy. Their friends and siblings have children that they are close to, and "...their home is always open to the children". She continues:

They have acquired knowledge and gained insights about children's needs, and they are aware of the difficulties that a family with children may face. They know that adopted children may have experienced several separations prior to adoption. They understand the importance of the attachment process for adopted children. [...] They show each other mutual love and respect. Together, they have gone through difficult times, when they couldn't have children of their own, and they have worked through this. Today, their relationship seems to be warm, stable and open. The investigator [the social worker] has found that Maria and Aron have a genuine interest in children, and that they have shown a great interest in other people, and people of other cultures. Their social network is large and stable.

And further:

The investigator finds that Maria and Aron are mature and responsible people with a positive view of life. Their decision to adopt seems to be well considered and it is a unanimous decision. The investigator believes that their expectations are realistic, as to what it means to adopt and take care of an adoptive child from another country. They can offer a secure and loving upbringing, and also the care and support children need. For a long time, Maria and Aron have had a strong desire to have a child, and they see children as a natural part of life. Maria and Aron will be able, personally as well as materially, to offer a child care and guidance in a secure and stimulating environment.

A detailed analysis of the social worker's short but rich statement demonstrates that the information presented can be linked to certain assessment topics specified in the handbook: knowledge and insight, personal characteristics, relationship, social network and motives for adopting (NBHW, 2009, 52, 71, 85, 88, 94). In terms of *knowledge and insight*, the social worker points out that the applicants are well aware of the importance of the attachment process, especially for adopted children.³⁰ The fact that they both grew up in stable and secure homes also indicates that they themselves have a secure attachment pattern and can respond to a child's need for closeness and security. Having realistic expectations further supports a conclusion that they know what an adoption entails and are well prepared. The statement that Maria and Aron see children as a natural part of life, and that their unanimous decision is well considered, illustrates that they have joint and sound *motives* for adopting.

The image of the couple's sound motives and readiness to adopt is also supported by the description of their *personalities* and their *relationship*. They are characterised as mature, responsible and positive, and they are said to love and respect each other. The social worker also includes a very short chronological narrative in her description: the couple have had difficulties, namely being childless, but they worked through it, and today their relationship is warm, stable and open. Rhetorically, this accomplishes several things. It tells the reader that they have the ability to handle crises, that they have processed the fact that they cannot have biological children, and that their relationship has been tested and proved to be solid. Finally, the statement also reports that the couple has a large and stable *social network* with many friends. The social worker points out specifically that they are close to children in their extended family and that they have an interest in people from other cultures. This information indicates that they will be able to support a child born in another country and engage in his or her culture of origin.

The analysis demonstrates that prospective parents were portrayed as suitable through a positive description of them, in relation to key areas of assessment. When relating the statement details to the handbook, however, it becomes evident that the characterisation also serves to rule out several of its specified risk factors (NBHW, 2009, 58, 76-7, 82, 87, 90). The text conveys to the reader, without saying so explicitly, that the applicants do *not* match the following:

- Insufficient insight concerning adopted children's needs
- Unrealistic expectations about the child or about being a parent
- Problems coping with difficulties and crises
- Unresolved grief resulting from childlessness
- Wanting to adopt as a way of resolving other problems or needs
- Prejudice about the background of adopted children
- Unstable relationship
- Lack of mutual respect and support
- No close friends
- Isolation and lack of support in social network

Consequently, the prospective adopters are categorised as good parents through a description of them as fulfilling the ideal presented in the assessment handbook. It communicates, implicitly but very effectively, that important risk factors have been eliminated. Given that, they can be trusted to offer what the child's best interest requires: love, security, care, support and stimulation.

Concluding discussion

In this article, I have examined the history of adoption in Sweden, through the assessment of adoptive parents in individual cases from four periods: the 1920s, 1950s, 1970s and 2010s. In this concluding section, I discuss the changing meaning of 'good parents' and 'the child's best interest' as part of the broader development of adoption policy and practice. I do so by relating my findings to the set of perspectives, or paradigms, defined by Winslow (2017, 11-6) as decisive for the development of adoption. As described in the introduction, they represent different approaches to adoption, namely, as a child welfare institution to be run and controlled by social work expertise (child welfare paradigm), as a humanitarian act with the main purpose of 'saving' children in need (humanitarian/child-saving paradigm, and development paradigm), and as a way of helping childless couples waiting to build a family (consumer paradigm). Winslow identifies these approaches as governing international adoption in the U.S., but they are also highly relevant when studying the history of adoption in Sweden.

By stating from the very beginning, when drafting and passing the first Swedish Adoption Act, that no adoption would be finalised unless it was for the benefit of the child, adoption was established within the child welfare paradigm. It should thus not be a private arrangement, but an expert-run operation with the child's best interest as its paramount consideration. It is, however, important to recognise that the initiative behind the law stemmed rather from the humanitarian perspective or, as I prefer to call it, the child-saving perspective. In the political context of the early 1900s, adoption was part of the solution to a social problem, namely the precarious situation for poor children and children born out of wedlock. These children were to be 'saved', and the intentions were that many of them would be adopted and thereby included in and supported by a responsible family.

As I have demonstrated, an adoption at this time was legitimised through a comparison between biological and adoptive parents. While birth parents were described as unable and sometimes even unwilling to care for their child, adoptive parents were portrayed as both able and willing to do so. In line with what Gill (1997, 97-106) and Keating (2009, 133-6, 211) have shown in relation to American and British contexts, the criteria for adoptive parenthood were not very elaborate, focusing simply on the ability to meet a child's need for care and financial support. Given that, adoption could be interpreted as primarily fulfilling the political child-saving agenda. Then, however, it is important to note another aspect of the assessment, namely the emphasis on the adoptive parents' emotional engagement. Not only were they able and willing to take care of the child, but they wanted to do so because of an emotional bond. That, I would suggest, is the argument by which the adoption was legitimised in relation to the child welfare paradigm. It conveyed to the reader that the adoption was not only a practical solution to problems of care and hence a means of child-saving, but indeed an act in the best interest of the individual child.

In the mid-1950s, adoption as a professional practice was no longer accompanied by political child-saving efforts, but was instead challenged by the consumer paradigm, focusing on the needs of childless couples waiting to start a family. Since the 1920s, adoption had become widely accepted as a way of forming a family. As the list of well-situated couples wanting a child grew longer, an increasing number of placements were arranged privately instead of through the children's welfare board, whose pre-placement assessment would exclude unfit

parents and safeguard the child's best interest. Private placements were hence a threat to the child welfare paradigm. Still, social work procedures were not weakened but rather strengthened, due to further professionalisation and even more elaborate assessment methods supported by national guidelines. When the definition of what was best for a child included a nuclear family into which the child could have been born, and a complete break with biological parents, the professionally arranged *in blanco* adoptions and the explicit matching of children with prospective adopters were fit for purpose.

The assessment statements and the way of legitimising an adoption can be understood in relation to this. Just like in the U.S., the adopters' feelings, personalities and psychological readiness to adopt, rather than their life circumstances and behaviour, were now in focus (Berebitsky, 2000, 147-154; Gill, 2002, 168-172). The description of them indicated their sound motive for adopting, namely a pure and genuine desire to have a child, which was crucial according to Swedish and American advisory literature of the time (Gill, 2002, 169; Herman, 2004, 205-9; Lindgren, 2006, 126). The characterisation also demonstrated that they accepted and engaged in the scrutiny of their own lives and personalities, something that was required in what Herman has called the therapeutic culture of adoption: "Would-be adopters who did not cooperate with professionals were likely to make poor parents" (Herman, 2004, 194). Interestingly, this also demonstrated that they did not assume a consumer's perspective, but understood and accepted the superiority of the child's best interest and, hence also, the child welfare paradigm.

What further strengthened the child welfare perspective, I would argue, was the fact that birth parents were no longer described primarily in relation to their shortcomings. Instead, a mother's wish to offer her child a better life, i.e. the ideal nuclear family that adoption experts strived for, was presented as unselfish and responsible. This corresponds with the change of attitude in a U.S. context, as described by Melosh. When single mothers were no longer portrayed as 'fallen women' but as 'girls in trouble', adoption was considered to be the best solution for all parties, and an act of love (Melosh, 2002, 120-8). In the case I analysed, the social worker's reference to the birth parents' way of reasoning supported her own conclusion, that the adoption was in the best interest of the child and should be finalised. In this era of high demand for adoptable babies, it also served to prove that the adoption had not been forced and aimed at helping a childless couple, but was arranged to secure the welfare of the child. It is interesting to note, however, that even if the child welfare paradigm was maintained, the new definitions of good parents and the child's best interest corresponded well with what the well-off childless couples were seeking: to form a nuclear family with a son or daughter who could have been their own by birth, and to live a secure life without having to worry about the child's biological parents. In that respect, the consumer perspective and the child welfare perspective overlapped.

In the late 1960s, when intercountry adoption grew rapidly but was as yet unregulated, the child welfare paradigm faced new challenges. Rosbjørn Eriksen (2020, 15-7) has described the transition from domestic to intercountry adoption in the Scandinavian countries as a confrontation between the humanitarian paradigm, represented by early pioneers driven by a child-saving agenda, and the child welfare paradigm, represented by child welfare officials trying to secure professional and ethical procedures. In the case of Sweden, I would say that the child welfare paradigm was challenged by a powerful combination of a consumer perspective and a child-saving perspective. Given the demise of domestic adoption, intercountry adoption became a genuine solution for individuals who were waiting for a child

or, as Rosbjørn Eriksen (2020, 19) puts it, a way of meeting “a great desire for children”. At the same time, however, it was perceived as a commendable means of helping destitute children and maybe even saving lives (Lindgren, 2010, 26-30, 49-54). Given this, intercountry adoption came to be seen, on the political and professional level, as problematic but unavoidable (Lindgren, 2010, 26-30; Rosbjørn Eriksen, 2020, 17-8). It had to be facilitated, but also regulated and subjected to the child welfare paradigm and proper assessment procedures. The issuing of new assessment guidelines tailored to this form of adoption was part of this. One must keep in mind, though, that the struggle to control intercountry adoption mediation was only in its infancy and would continue for decades to come (Lindgren, 2010, 41-84).

In this situation, the assessment and the final statement legitimising an adoption had to make sure that growing up in a Swedish family could be in the best interest of a child born in another country. My analysis has shown that this was accomplished by means of a description of the child, demonstrating that he or she had been well looked after and had developed normally when staying with the adoptive family. The child thus became a key reference point for acknowledging ‘good parenthood’. The portrayal of the child also answered the debate about the hazards of intercountry adoption and the worries concerning whether, and how, children born abroad would adjust to life in Sweden (Lindgren, 2010, 26-30). A statement declaring that the child was learning the language, had friends and was “well adjusted” assured the reader that the prospects for the future were bright.

This was also closely related to new criteria for parent suitability, namely accepting and welcoming differences between parents and their child. Just like in the U.S., as described by Herman, the idea of matching was rejected, and difference became the “quintessence of authenticity” (Herman, 2008, 228, 281). The new Swedish guidelines emphasised that fearing difference, as well as limiting a child’s social contacts outside the home, was disqualifying for adoptive parenthood (Lindgren, 2010, 37-8). These principles were clearly reflected in the assessment, as the presentation of the adopters and their ways of life included information about close emotional bonds, neighbouring families, friends to play with and loving grandparents. It was made clear that the adoptive parents could offer what was in the best interest of the internationally adopted child, namely to be loved despite differences and to be supported in exploring the outside world. That in turn signalled that the adoption, even if influenced by consumer and child-saving perspectives, was in compliance with the child welfare paradigm.

In early 21st century Sweden, the welfare paradigm was supported by the development paradigm, according to which welfare systems in so called ‘sending countries’ should be strengthened so that children could be looked after where they were born instead of being adopted transnationally (Winslow, 2017, 14-5). This was also in line with international treaties such as the Hague Adoption Convention and the Children’s Rights Convention. Intercountry adoption could still be legitimised with reference to children in need (Andersson, 2010, 61), but the agreement that in-country solutions were in the best interest of the child made arguments based on a consumer perspective less valid than ever before. The requirements for passing as a suitable parent were developed, and tightened, accordingly. As Andersson (2010, 62-82) has shown, an even stronger emphasis on a prospective adopter’s inner psychological qualities followed from a new construction of the adopted child as vulnerable, due to separation, loss and discontinuous attachment. Vulnerable children were children ‘at

risk', and they needed 'non-risk' parents who could compensate for their loss by offering stability and a secure attachment process.

In the assessment process, risk factors were eliminated, and prospective adopters' personal strengths and emotional resources were emphasised. Good parents of the 2010s were aware of the difficulties of being parents, of an adopted child's losses and trauma, and of the possible risk of a problematic attachment process. They also knew how to handle and work through problems of their own. Assessment practices can hence be read as a manifestation of an adoption discourse in which loss and attachment troubles were "unavoidable dimensions of adoptive kinship" (Herman, 2008, 281), and of a therapeutic culture in which self-scrutiny and the ability to discuss and handle difficulties were central (Noordegraaf et al., 2009, 93-6; Wirzén & Lindgren, 2021, 587-8). It is important to note, however, that even though there was a strong emphasis on an adopted child's vulnerability and needs, it was not the needs per se that legitimised an adoption, as with a child-saving perspective, but the adopters' capacity to meet them, in line with the child welfare paradigm.

In conclusion, Swedish adoption was established within the framework of a child welfare paradigm, but developed and changed in relation to other supporting, as well as contesting, perspectives. 'Good parents' and 'the child's best interest' have been defined and redefined through everyday professional assessment procedures, and their ascribed meanings signify the changing history of adoption. Today, the child's best interest is to have parents who not only provide a safe home and affection, but who are self-reflexive, knowledgeable and prepared to embark on a risky and unpredictable journey, hoping to tie bonds of love. Maybe that too will change.

Cecilia Lindgren

Linköping university

Dept. of Thematic Studies - Child Studies

cecilia.lindgren@liu.se

Funding

This work was supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare, grant number 2015-00542.

Empirical material

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Swedish government official reports, SOU Series (SOU)

Parliamentary documents:

First chamber private member's motions (FCM); Second chamber private member's motions (SCM); Committee reports (CR); Government bills (GB); Law committee statements (LCS); First law committee statements (1LCS); First chamber parliamentary records (FCR); Second chamber parliamentary records (SCR)

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Abstract

This article examines the history of adoption in Sweden through an analysis of the explicit assessment and formation of new families. Against the backdrop of general adoption trends and transitions, from the 1910s through to the 2010s, individual cases are used to explore how adoption has been legitimised with reference to the best interest of the child. The analysis is based on social workers' written statements concerning non-relative adoptions from four periods: the 1920s, 1950s, 1970s and 2010s. It focuses on the rhetorical means by which adoptive parents were categorised as suitable parents and what this can tell us about changing notions of good parenthood and the child's best interest. The results are discussed in relation to previous research and the different approaches identified as decisive for the development of adoption, namely, adoption as a child welfare institution to be run and controlled by social work expertise, as a humanitarian act with the main purpose of 'saving' children in need, and as a way of helping childless couples waiting to build a family. It is in the intersection of these contesting but overlapping perspectives that adoption, and the meanings ascribed to good parenthood and the child's best interest, have changed.

Résumé

Les notions changeantes de « bons parents » et de « l'intérêt supérieur de l'enfant ».

L'adoption en Suède 1918-2018.

Cet article examine l'histoire de l'adoption en Suède par une analyse des évaluations explicites et de la formation des nouvelles familles. Avec en toile de fond les tendances générales des adoptions et leurs transitions, depuis les années 1910 jusqu'aux années 2010, des cas individuels sont exploités pour explorer la façon dont l'adoption a été rendue légitime en référence à l'intérêt supérieur de l'enfant. L'analyse est basée sur les déclarations écrites des travailleurs sociaux concernant les adoptions d'enfants non apparentés, de quatre périodes différentes: les années 1920, 1950, 1970 et 2010. Elle se focalise sur les moyens rhétoriques utilisés pour catégoriser les parents adoptifs en tant que parents appropriés, et sur ce que cela peut nous apprendre sur les nouvelles notions de bonne parentalité et de l'intérêt supérieur de l'enfant. Les résultats sont abordés par rapport aux précédentes recherches, et les différentes approches sont identifiées comme étant décisives pour l'évolution de l'adoption ; notamment que l'adoption est une institution du bien-être de l'enfant qui doit

être gérée et contrôlée par l'expertise des travailleurs sociaux, que c'est un acte humanitaire ayant pour objectif principal de « sauver » les enfants dans le besoin, et que c'est un moyen pour aider les couples ne pouvant pas avoir d'enfant à construire une famille. C'est à travers le chevauchement de ces perspectives contestataires mais croisées que l'adoption, ainsi que les significations attribuées à la bonne parentalité et à l'intérêt supérieur de l'enfant, ont changé.

¹ Swedish code of statutes (SCS) 1917:378, SCS 2018:1288. In the committee report and parliamentary debates preceding the first law, various aspects of adoption were discussed in terms of “the best interest of the child”, and the final Adoption Act stated that an adoption may not be approved unless it was “for the benefit of the child”. In parliamentary documents as well as in adoption practice, these two expressions were used interchangeably. In adoption court records from the 1920s, in stating that the law's requirement was met, social workers would sometimes use the expression “for the benefit of the child” and sometimes “in the best interest of the child”.

² For details, see Lindgren, 2006, 61-8; Lind & Lindgren, 2017, 55.

³ Second chamber private member's motion (SCM), 1908:89, 9-12; Law committee statement (LCS), 1908:19, 7-8; Second chamber parliamentary records (SCR), 1908:18, 7-8. The foster families referred to in the political discussions were the ones in which the child's placement was considered to be permanent. It is important to note, however, that the Swedish foster care system of the time was very complex and diverse, involving both formal and informal placements and various forms of arrangements. For further reading, see for example Nyberg, 2000 and Sköld, 2006.

⁴ SCS 1917:378; Committee report (CR) 1917, Adoption legislative proposal 1913, 37, §1.

⁵ The Swedish model for stratification of socio-economic status includes three ‘social groups’ based on occupation. In early 1970s research, these were labelled as: ‘working class’ (social group 3) including laborers, farmers and low-ranking office workers; ‘middle class’ (social group 2) including higher-ranking clerical and sales workers, governmental bureaucrats, small businessmen and other white-collar occupations; and ‘better situated’ (social group 1) including professionals and semi-professionals, high-ranking public officials and civil servants, and business executives and managers, see Olsen, 1974, 325. For the purpose of the analysis referred to in this article I used Swedish research and statistical data relevant to each period to categorise adoptive families according to the social group model. The categorisation is based on occupational information in the adoption records. For details, see Lindgren, 2006, 64, 100, 142-3, 191-2.

⁶ SCM 1921:209; First chamber private member's motion (FCM) 1938:102; SCM 1940:193; First chamber parliamentary records (FCR) 1940:21, 2-4; SCR 1940:22, 67-8; FCM 1943:174; SCM 1943:262; Government bill (GB) 1944:100, 8-10, 21-4; SCS 1944:180. For adoption statistics, see Lindgren, 2006, 29-30.

⁷ GB 1958:144, 106, 213.

⁸ For information on the Swedish model for socio-economic stratification, and the analysis regarding adoptive families in the 1920s, 1950s and 1970s, see footnote 5.

⁹ SCS 1958:637, Ch. 4 §1, 2; SCS 1958:640, Ch. 4 §2, 5, 9, 12-3, Ch. 7 §5, Ch. 20 §5-7. The act was passed in 1958 and implemented in 1959.

¹⁰ Swedish government official reports, SOU series (SOU) 1954:6, 75-7, 166-8; GB 1958:144, 61-3, 104-5, 109, 210-3; First law committee statement (1LCS) 1958:B14, 71-2, 77.

¹¹ GB 1958:144, 219-20; SCS 1958:640, Ch. 4 §9.

¹² SOU 1967:57. For details on this early period of intercountry adoption in Sweden, see Lindgren, 2010, 21-40.

¹³ SCS 1971:796.

¹⁴ SCS 1970:840.

¹⁵ FCM 1967:172, 12; 1LCS 1967:48, 7, 9; GB 1970:186, 26-7, 29, 46; SCM 1967:59, 5; GB 1970:186, 47.

¹⁶ GB 1970:186, 26-7.

¹⁷ SCM 1967:59, 6; 1LCS 1967:48, 6; GB 1970:186, 24, 26, 28, 46; FCR 1970:46, 65.

¹⁸ For information on the Swedish model for socio-economic stratification, and the analysis regarding adoptive families in the 1920s, 1950s and 1970s, see footnote 5.

¹⁹ SCS 1979:552.

²⁰ SCS 1997:191; SCS 1997:192.

²¹ SOU 2001:10; GB 2001/02:123

²² GB 2017/18:12; SCS 2018:1288; SCS 2018:1289.

²³ For a possibility to check the correctness of facts and quotes, please contact the author.

²⁴ The following description is based on court records from Stockholm City Court from 1922-4, case 73 (author's coding). The statement referred to, and quoted, covers one page of hand-written text (33 lines).

²⁵ Stockholm District Court 1922-4, case 118 (author's coding)

²⁶ Stockholm District Court 1922-4, case 116 (author's coding)

²⁷ The following description is based on records from Stockholm City Court 1956-8, case 93 (author's coding). The statement referred to, and quoted, covers 1.5 pages of type-written text (49 lines).

²⁸ The following description is based on court records from Stockholm City Court 1973-5, case 123 (author's coding). The statement referred to, and quoted, covers 1 page of type-written text (36 lines).

²⁹ The following description is based on records from one of Sweden's four adoption agencies at the time, case 2011:F3 (author's coding). The concluding 'Summary and assessment' referred to, and quoted, covers 1 page of type-written text (41 lines). For information on data collection and ethical vetting, see Lind & Lindgren, 2017, 55, 62.

³⁰ This refers to the psychological theory of attachment, which is widely applied in adoption policy and practice. It focuses on the ultimate importance of the process through which a child forms a relationship (secure, ambivalent, avoidant or disorganised) with primary caregivers. For an introduction to and critical analysis of today's attachment discourse in relation to adoption, see Pylypa, 2016. For its application in Swedish adoption policy and practice in the 2010s, see Andersson, 2010, Lindgren, 2015, and the National Board of Health and Welfare, 2009.